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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

16 July 1957

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The Situation in the Gulf of Aqaba

1. King Saud, whose pro-US stand is under attack both within his own entourage and from the pro-Nasser forces outside Saudi Arabia, has been put under considerable pressure by Nasser on the Aqaba question. The King has responded in such a way as to show that he accepts Nasser's interpretation of the issue. The Saudi argument that the Gulf is a closed "Arab sea" has been consistently supported by other Arab states, including Jordan and Iraq, who see it as part of the unresolved Arab-Israeli struggle. For their part, the Israelis have not changed their contention as to the international character of the waterway and have since the Suez crisis proceeded with development of the port and have increased the volume of shipping and cargo moving through the Gulf.

2. In view of the US position on the question of freedom of navigation in the Gulf of Aqaba, the situation is well adapted to Nasser's use as a means of forcing Saud into a position in which

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he must publicly make a choice between the Arab cause and his friendship with the US. The issue has already impeded US-Saudi negotiations on American grant aid for the Dammam port and improvement of facilities at Dhahran airport. Saud has also publicly and privately warned of the depth of his feelings on the issue, and ordered the suspension of pilgrim traffic through the Gulf during this year's haj on grounds of the security threat posed by the Israeli presence at Elath.

3. The possibility of direct military moves, such as mining the straits or an attempt to block passage with Egypt's newly acquired submarine and other craft, cannot be excluded. It is more likely that Saud will convene a conference of Moslem states in order to seek means of protecting the Holy places of Islam. A conference of this type might proclaim the existence of a "blockade", a situation which could lead to a serious crisis involving US and other Western interests, as well as possible Israeli forceful action designed to keep the waterway open.

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